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SIPDIS

SIPDIS, SENSITIVE

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SUBJECT: SHIFTS IN SLOVENIA'S POLITICAL LEFT

¶1. (U) SUMMARY: The latest public opinion polls in Slovenia show for the first time center left Social Democrats [SD] overtaking Prime Minister Janez Jansa's center right Slovene Democratic Party [SDS] by anywhere from one to six percent. This represents tremendous progress by SD in the last two years. Confirming the precipitous slide of the last six months, four more leading members of formerly ruling Liberal Democracy [LDS] recently left the party. This time they took the extra step of joining SD, thus making SD the largest opposition group in the Slovenian parliament. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (U) Since it lost elections in 2004, LDS, the leading political party for 12 years [1992 - 2004] has never recovered its footing, and it was only a matter of time before it began to collapse. LDS has recently experienced a significant loss of public support with the last poll showing only about eight percent support [in most of 2004 it still enjoyed more than 20 percent approval], its poorest result ever.

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LDS in Disarray  
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¶3. (U) LDS has attempted to reorganize, but to little avail. It held a Congress in October 2005, and elected Jelko Kacin as the new party president, replacing former Prime Minister Anton Rop whose term had ended. Many members of the party disagreed with Kacin's leadership, and the first major cracks in party unity appeared. The first prominent member of LDS to leave was Janez Drnovsek who froze his membership in 2002 when he became President of the Republic. In 2006 he relinquished his membership altogether. Gregor Golobic, a powerful and longtime LDS party leader with close ties to Drnovsek, followed closely behind.

¶4. (U) Due to the steady loss of public support for LDS, demands from different factions within LDS for Kacin's resignation, and former Minister of Economy Matej Lahovnik's resignation as vice-president, the Council of LDS called for another party Congress to discuss the new program and possible changes in leadership. Kacin and Zdenka Cerar, another vice-president of the party, called for a vote of confidence on their leadership at the Congress held in January 2007. Both received the needed support to hold on to their positions, resulting in what has become a flood of high profile party resignations.

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Fleeing a Sinking Ship  
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¶5. (U) In late February, Matej Lahovnik who had left LDS just before the January Congress, established an independent deputy group within the Parliament, and five deputies and former members of LDS joined him. On March 9, Lahovnik and his colleagues from the independent deputy group established an association known as "ZARES" [meaning "for real"] and expressed the expectation that ZARES would

grow into a full fledged party in time to participate in the 2008 parliamentary elections. On March 11 Gregor Golobic and Bogdan Biscak [both former secretaries general of LDS] joined them as well.

¶16. (U) On March 19 Darja Lavtizar Bebler, Marko Pavliha [vice president of the Parliament], Anton Rop [former president of LDS and Prime Minister] and Milan Cvikl resigned their membership in LDS and two days later joined Borut Pahor's SD and its deputy group in the Parliament. Thus, SD became the largest opposition deputy group with 14 seats. LDS still retains 13 seats, for the time being.

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New Alignments for 2008  
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¶17. (U) With the long expected collapse of LDS well underway, the political left has entered a period of reconstruction. A similar upheaval on the right in 2000 resulted in the fracturing of the leading parties - Slovene People's Party (SLS) and Slovene Christian Democrats (SKD) - which, after uniting briefly disintegrated rapidly. A much weaker SLS and an entirely new and much less influential New Slovenia (NSi) emerged and have played only minor roles in ensuing national governments. Meanwhile, Prime Minister Janez Jansa's Slovene Democrats (SDS) continued to strengthen and in 2004 won a majority in the parliament, bringing the center right to full power for the first time since independence. Looking at the current alignment of parties on the left, LDS's disintegration is likely to end with the emergence of a much weaker LDS and a new party established by the newer generation of LDS deputies who recently quit the party. It is not yet clear what level of support Lahovnik and his colleagues might enjoy, but it is possible they could find themselves ahead of LDS in the polls. In the meantime, Borut Pahor's SD continues to grow in popularity - bringing it to

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levels of approval it has not previously enjoyed.

¶18. (SBU) Comment. It will be difficult to predict how well the left will do in 2008 parliamentary elections before we know who will run for president in late 2007. It is widely believed that should Borut Pahor run for President, as he has indicated in the past he would like to do, he has a good chance of winning. Without Pahor on the campaign trail, SD's chances of significant gains in 2008 elections are greatly reduced. Pahor has indicated to COM in the past that if his party thought it could do very well in 2008 and asked him to forego running for president, he would. All signs point to SD doing well in 2008, to the extent that there is even some chatter of a "grand coalition" with SDS. Another important deciding factor for Pahor will likely be if current President Drnovsek chooses to run again for president, and we may not know that until shortly before the official campaign kicks off. Drnovsek, despite international political blunders, is still widely popular in Slovenia, and conventional wisdom says he would win if he chose to run again.

¶19. (SBU) Though we have yet to see a comprehensive explanation of ideals and goals from Matej Lahovnik and his ZARES movement, the fact that it has attracted some of LDS's best technocrats could indicate it would take a more pragmatic approach to politics. If it can form a coherent party in time for 2008 elections and cross the 4% threshold to enter parliament, it might provide an attractive option for a larger party looking for a junior partner. End Comment.